

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHJI #0303/01 1071404
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 171404Z APR 06
FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH
TO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1351
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1429
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 6421
RUEHYN/AMEMBASSY SANAA PRIORITY 0105
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9071
INFO RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L JEDDAH 000303

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

RIYADH, PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN; PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR
TSOU; DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/16/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [BEXP](#) [CVIS](#) [SCUL](#) [KISL](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: OVERVIEW OF CG'S MARCH VISIT TO NEJRAN PROVINCE

REF: JEDDAH 285 AND JEDDAH 286

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller, for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

A SAMPLE OF NEJRANI HISTORY AND CULTURE

11. (C) The Consul General, ConGenOff, and A/RSO visited Nejran Province from March 26-28. Situated in the southwest of Saudi Arabia along the Yemeni border, the province is one of the least developed in the Kingdom. Yemen's cultural influence is stronger in Nejran than anywhere else in the country, owing in large part to strong cross-border tribal affiliations. The provincial capital is one of the fastest growing cities in the Kingdom, and the region is one of the country's most fertile. After meetings with the Nejran Governor (reftel), the CG had the opportunity to tour various historical sites, including the Al-Ukhdood archaeological site. According to legend, Al-Ukhdood was the site of a Christian settlement of more than 60,000 people. They were burned to death sometime around 700 AD for refusing to convert to another religion. There is wide spread disagreement about exactly who killed the settlers. Historically, Jews have blamed the Muslims and Muslims have blamed the Jews.

12. (C) The archaeological site is not open to the public and special permission must be obtained from the Governor's office to enter it. The site was opened-up for the CG and she was taken on a tour of the vast ruins by "an expert" in Nejran history. Not surprisingly, the guide claimed that the Christians at Al-Ukhdood were killed by the Jews. He spoke of the martyrs with great respect and told the CG a story about their last stand before being executed. According to the guide, the Christians began building huge fires when they knew the Jews were coming for them. As a show of unyielding faith, they jumped into the fire before they could be killed. One terrified Christian woman, unsure about what to do, stood helpless with her young child cradled in her arms. The child looked up at his mother and quietly said, "Mother, go into the flame. Paradise is awaiting us." Without trepidation, the woman stepped into the fire, still holding her baby. "This child," continued the guide, "is one of the two Christian children who Muslims revere as holy figures. The other is the baby Jesus Christ."

13. (C) Interestingly, the guide claimed that the Christian

settlers at Al-Ukhdoon were massacred in the year 300 BC. When the CG remarked that Christians did not exist in 300 BC, the guide seemed dumbfounded and could not get his story straight. COMMENT. This exchange illustrates the endemic lack of research and exploration into ancient Arab civilization that has been conducted in Saudi Arabia. Historical and archaeological sites such as Al-Ukhdoon and M'Dain Saleh in the north have seen little in the way of excavation. On her hour-long walk through Al-Ukhdoon, the CG noticed old beer bottles strewn about alongside fragments of ancient pottery. Only recently has the SAG, in conjunction with the French Consulate in Jeddah, began excavating and conserving the site. The Governor of Nejran has been a huge proponent of this effort to explore, protect and showcase this treasure-trove of history located in his province (reftel). Still, the vast majority of the large site has never been explored, though with the Governor's encouragement, hopes are high that they soon will be. END COMMENT.

¶4. (C) In addition to the historical sites, the CG visited the crumbling old souqs which sell a variety of gifts unique to Nejran including bright wicker baskets and traditional Yemeni jambias (knives). Interestingly, the CG and ConGenOff were two of only a dozen women on the streets of the city of Nejran. Their presence, particularly at the gun and knife souqs, captivated the local vendors. More than other towns in the Western Province, Nejrani women stay at home and, if they don't, they walk the streets in full hijab or burqa.

THE NEJRAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

¶5. (C) On March 28, the CG met with representatives from the Nejran Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NCCI). Five members of the Chamber's Board were in attendance and the Chamber Vice President, Mr. Abdullah Ali Bani, presided over the closed meeting. Mr. Bani began by expressing his concerns about the difficulties Nejrani businessmen encounter when trying to obtain US visas and, likewise, the difficulties American businessmen encounter when trying to obtain Saudi visas. "Tourism is the ambassador of countries...we want our relationship to be strong like it was in the past." The Vice President added that it is critical for Nejrani businessmen to have visas that are issued with a longer validity. The CG explained that reciprocity was the issue and that, by law, the US cannot issue visas to Saudis for more than two years until a new bi-lateral reciprocity agreement extending the validity period is signed.

¶6. (C) The CG remarked that she had visited some of the historical sites around Nejran and that she thought other Americans would also enjoy touring the region. A Board member replied that he wished more American tourists would come to Nejran to help boost their weak tourist market. The CG explained that it was difficult for Americans to obtain tourist visas to Saudi Arabia, but expressed her support for the idea and encouraged the Board to express their concerns with their Government. Finally, the CG told the Chamber that she had met with the Governor of Nejran and had solicited and received his support for a week of American commerce and cultural activities in conjunction with AmConGen Jeddah's Public Diplomacy and FCS sections. The NCCI also expressed its support for the idea. The CG then asked whether or not the NCCI had any plans to incorporate a woman's section of the Chamber, adding that American businesswomen could help develop said section. Mr. Bani replied, "No. No plans yet. We'll leave it for next year." Gfoeller